

the white shadow

portrait of the artist as a young rascal

SANEH SANGSUK

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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Dark, quiet and cold. There's only the buzz of insects, and a thin film of mist in the sky. Tomorrow will be a beautiful day. Tonight will be one more night you'll spend lying quietly or sitting quietly or reclining quietly or sipping coffee quietly. You won't read, won't write, won't listen to music. The bitter strong coffee will keep you wide-awake. You never can sleep at night. Maybe the woman who just left, the woman with whom you just slept, will come to see you in the morning. She's pretty and neat and friendly and strong. She wears jeans and canvas shoes and a man's shirt and her hair is cut short, but she's a woman of great charm. Before she left, she invited you to make an offering to the monks. Before she left, the woman said *Some morning when you're free, how about going to the village with me to make an offering to the monks?* Sometimes she comes in the evening. She's a lonely woman dressed businesslike like a man almost every time, but she's lonely and cunningly hides loneliness in that cheeriness of hers. Sometimes the woman suggests the two of you go out and have dinner in town but you never go. Sometimes in the evening the woman helps

with the cooking and keeps you company over dinner, but she's never stayed the night. This woman must've slept with men before, but you've never asked. She must've slept with her lover many, many times, but you've never asked. She must've gone to see some other man in the morning to invite him to make an offering to the monks and help him with the cooking and keep him company over dinner and help with the washing-up and stay the night, but you've never asked. In any case, she's a woman who's got charm. She knows what such and such an expression on your face when you look at her means and you know what such and such an expression on her face when she looks at you means. She knows what such and such a sentence of yours means and you know what such and such a sentence of hers means, but you and she only slept together as all men and women are wont to sleep together under compelling circumstances. Three months – that was rather fast. But not so fast actually. With some women you've been faster than this and with some men she's probably been faster than this too. You and she don't talk about the future or about love. There's no commitment, and just as well. She's invited you to stay at her place: if you actually did, she'd fall right into hell. But before that your mother came to you in a dream. She told you *Don't do it*. She expressed herself through silence. The woman comes often, almost every day, if not in the morning then in the evening. The woman sometimes asks you *Are you afraid of ghosts?* sometimes asks you *How far has your*

*writing gone?* And you tell her that you are and that what you've done doesn't amount to much. You wonder whether she's pregnant, and if she is whether you'll take her to get an abortion or run away from her. Seven days ago you went back to Phraek Narm Daeng. The woman watched you gather clothes and books into your shoulder bag without saying anything and drove you to the railway station and then she said *I hope you won't make yourself scarce forever, right?* She must have thought you'd desert her for good. Deep down she must be worried. Gathering your things and running away: very bad, that. If she's pregnant and you must take her to get an abortion or run away from her: very bad, that. Tomorrow morning if the woman comes and invites you to make an offering, maybe you'll do it. Maybe you'll want to cook the rice yourself and make simple dishes as alms to the monks, why not. You haven't done so for ages, something like ten years. But if you don't, it doesn't matter. When you first came here, you meant to make offerings to monks, you meant to sleep soundly all night and get up before dawn – because of cockcrow, not because of an alarm-clock, mind you – and go out to give food to the monks, immaculate white rice sprinkled with jasmine petals you'd find somewhere, fragrant freshly cooked rice still steaming and redolent of jasmine as well. Fragrant! Fragrant! Fragrant! O so fragrant! Jasmine in its previous life must have been a Buddhist nun for sure and in the life before that a sarus crane and in the life before that a white swan and in the lives before

those going backwards a mimusops, a tuberose, a gardenia and a mimusops again and before that a white lotus and a white virgin. At the end of its present existence, it'll be reborn as a white fairy in heaven. Fragrant! Fragrant! Fragrant! O so fragrant! But if you don't make an offering to the monks, it doesn't matter. Going out for a stroll is just as well. Not far from here there's a meadow. Every morning you go out for a stroll, your eyes dark red from lack of sleep. You look for the couple of forketails. You want to hear the song of the couple of forketails. There's the couple of forketails. There's another couple of forketails in the deserted orchard. Sounds like a primer for toddlers of yore. But when you were a toddler you didn't learn from this book. You read it later when you were more grown up. What you learned was a b c. What you learned was *The wind whooshes over the stormy sea*, with a black-and-white picture of coconut trees flattened by gusts. What you learned was *The owl rolled the bowl into a hole while the mole stored the gold*, or something to that effect. For those two forketails, you put some rice on a banana leaf and placed it in the old spirit house which is so out of kilter it might collapse any day. You tried to get them used to you, you whistled in imitation. When you heard them sing you smiled quietly the smile of someone spaced out. Spaced out to where? You don't know. Count your blessings you're alone and certain no-one can see you. Nevertheless you'd better begin to be a little on your guard. And then the forketails come every day, along with other birds – starlings, bulbuls,

fantails, pigeons and a few other pretty species whose names you don't know. But all are wild and none will let you get close. They only peck about and sing. They don't sing to thank you: they sing almost as if to warn of danger. They hop about and sway their necks and won't let you come close. Even the pigeons won't let you come close. You merely stand at a distance, spying on them from behind a copse. If they don't let you come close, maybe it's because you try to talk to them every day. You talk to them cautiously, deliberately, like someone trying to show his pure intentions in front of a phalanx of suspicious eyes. You silently beg them to understand you and you talk to them with a voice that resounds in your chest, *Birds, I mean well. Birds, I'm not going to play tricks on you. Birds, I only want to talk to you. Birds! Birds! Birds! I'm not trying to deceive you by inviting you to the Red Cross fair...* And you can't think of what to say next. There are masses of birds here. If you could stand back and look at yourself, you'd see yourself like a scarecrow at first light trying to get in touch with birds. Every morning you go out for a walk in the orchard, across the brook and into the fields. Every morning the scarecrow strolls about aimlessly, gazing into space and feeling adrift in its happiness. Why adrift? You know not. It seems that the dawn is waiting for the scarecrow. The dawn preens its hues to welcome the scarecrow. The dawn whispers *See there, those snake gourds in full bloom; see there, those ivy gourds in full bloom; see there, those blue peas in full bloom; see there, those pumpkins in full bloom.*

The dawn says *See there, the sun*. The dawn says *See there, the dew that speckles the leaves with light*. The lonely scarecrow drifting far from humankind observes everything like a sleepwalker, sad and lonely amid late winter fog, sighs noiselessly, sighs at the sight of a nest of caterpillars, at the sight of clumsy paddyfield crabs that dribble slime the colour of soap bubbles, at the sight of a few stars still lingering in the sky, at the sight of the beauty and serenity of the world. The deep red sun casts its first rays above the jungle fleece. You're happy and tell yourself that such an intense happiness is going to toughen your mind so that even the most devastating sorrow won't rock or roil it and you'll never again feel the bitterness that blackens your chest. You go on walking aimlessly. On some days you hear a temple bell ring out; some religious ceremony must be on. At times you surprise yourself muttering bits of prayers you still remember. At times you think about some songs or some poems or some young women. At times you think about nothing at all. At times you pick up juicy young rice stalks to eat them. You chew on their sweetness and spit out the fibres. You look and you see. You hear and you stop to listen. Ah, that's the mowing of a cow in the village. Ah, that's an age-old rain tree with its widespread, thick, shady foliage and a festoon of rust-red primeval mushrooms round its trunk. Ah, that's a cobweb sprinkled with dewdrops. Ah, that's a fantail. At times you only see and you know what's going on. At times you only hear and you know what's going on. At times you gather tapering

shoots of swamp morning glory that grow by ricefield dykes or shoots of ivy gourds and of ipil-ipil by the fences to make your first meal of the next day. At times you look for shoots in the bamboo groves. Sometimes you find a climbing perch flapping frantically in a drying puddle by a dyke and you grab it and go and release it in the brook. The fish writhes in your clasped hand, a little life writhes in your clasped hand, your hand is soiled with mud, the fish is soiled with mud, but life isn't soiled by mud. Nothing can soil real life, even if it's the life of a murderer or of a prostitute. Life is pure. To destroy life is to destroy purity. Sometimes as you stroll by a snake springs up and rears its head ready to strike. What kind of snake it is you know not. It's angry and you're scared. You utter words of apology even though you're still scared and awkward in the dumbness of your fright – *sorry, sorry* – and you slowly back out. Maybe it's a poisonous snake, that's what you always think and it gives a thrilling flavour to your fear. A poisonous snake... the life of a poisonous snake... It probably doesn't want to have anything to do with you either. There are snakes all over, mostly pit vipers. When a pit viper bites you, you gradually go to sleep, gradually feel pleasantly drowsy and in great pain and gradually die pleasantly and in great pain. But there aren't pit vipers only, but also bronzebacks and iridescent earth snakes and kukri snakes and cobras, or so the locals say, and you have to be careful wherever you go at night. ...



Chevalier des Arts & des Lettres Saneh Sangsuk, born 1957, is a living paradox: in continental Europe where his works have been translated into seven languages, he is hailed as the Thai writer par excellence; yet, at home, 'Daen-aran Saengthong' (his pen name) raises



twice as many jeers as cheers - his writings and personality, grounded in a thorough knowledge of Western and Eastern literatures and fired by a nonconformist turn of mind, offend local sensibilities, especially so *The White Shadow*, which was struck off the pre-selection list of the SEA Write Award in 1994, sold less than a thousand copies on the local market then (a huge loss for him, as it was self-published) but was reprinted recently. Since then, our literary knight has been surviving in Phetchaburi, south of Bangkok. with no computer, no phone, no TV, but books from floor to ceiling in his rented room, writing in longhand (his niece types out his prose) and occasionally being treated to lunch at the market by his friends after he helps them sweep the floor. As he is also a first-class translator from the English, his translation work may bring him enough to live on but it leaves him with little time to get on with his own writings. His 2001 bestselling novella, *Venom*, can be downloaded from [thaifiction.com](http://thaifiction.com), along with the first chapter of *Une Histoire vieille comme la pluie (Jao Karrakeit)*, published by Éditions du Seuil in 2004.